

Indiana House of Representatives

News and Information

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STATEHOUSE REPORT FROM REP. VERN TINCHER

INDIANAPOLIS – The first phase of the 2006 session of the Indiana General Assembly has come to a close, and it is time to review what has taken place to this point.

On Thursday (February 2), Indiana House members wrapped up work on bills that started in that chamber. The past two weeks have seen us debating and voting on more than 100 measures in floor sessions that often have lasted until midnight. Before we move to the next part of the legislative process, I want to look at some of the highlights of the first month of the session.

Everything begins with Major Moves, the governor's plan to sell the Indiana Toll Road to private foreign investors for \$3.85 billion to generate the revenue needed to pay for major road and bridge projects. This proposal, contained in House Bill 1008, was approved on a party-line vote.

I opposed Major Moves, but not because I disagree with the need to improve Indiana's infrastructure. I do not believe selling the toll road to foreign investors for 75 years is a sound financial decision. I would have preferred that we use a proposal that would bond toll increases already proposed by the governor and use future federal revenues to issue Garvee Bonds. This plan would sell bonds for a term of 20 years and generate around \$2 billion for road projects, without losing control of the toll road.

I have grave concerns that Major Moves contains land mines that will cause problems down the road. I worry that the state will carry a large financial responsibility in the event that the investors default. There is no guarantee that workers on the projects financed by Major Moves will receive competitive wages and benefits. I also wonder if this is the first step in selling off many of our state's assets, including our parks and hospitals, and programs that provide health care and other critical services for Hoosiers.

The best way to get the answers to these questions would have been to give the people of Indiana time to examine the program in public hearings. Unfortunately, the House majority did not agree with that effort to inform citizens, and HB 1008 was sent along to the Senate, where I hope the public's right to know will be respected.

It was very disappointing that the House majority also declined to do anything to respond to the public's ongoing concerns about time zones in Indiana. Leaders rejected any attempt to advance a bill that would give the people of this state a chance to decide in a public referendum whether Indiana should be in the Eastern or Central Time Zone.

Property tax relief was identified as this session's major priority by all House members. House Bill 1001 offers nearly \$150 million in property tax breaks, but identifies no way to pay for them. The bill provides one-time tax credits for homeowners this year, and there would be caps on rate increases for residential property, although those caps would not include levies for debt services and schools.

The relief contained in HB 1001 will do little to offset the double-digit property tax increases that home and business owners will see from the 2005-06 biennial state budget approved by last year's Legislature, a budget I voted against. I wish we had spent more time on property tax relief last year, because it would have helped property owners this year.

The move to restrict eminent domain gained popularity after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled governments can use the process to take private property for private economic development projects. HB 1010 would allow eminent domain to be used only as a last resort, but the bill exempts the Indiana Department of Transportation (INDOT), which means the state could use this provision to grab property for some of the public-private partnerships proposed by the governor.

In education, I opposed a measure to move the ISTEP skills test from the fall of the school year to the spring (HB 1240). Superintendent of Public Instruction Suellen Reed says the move will cost taxpayers \$45 million.

Other bills passed out of the House this session would establish human and sexual trafficking as a crime in Indiana (HB 1414), require lifetime parole for any person convicted of child molestation once that offender has completed his or her prison term (HB 1155), and deregulate the state's telecommunications industry (HB 1279), a move supporters claim will lower prices and provide more choices, but opponents believe will increase rates and ensure poor service.

With action on House bills complete, we now begin work on legislation sent to our chamber from the Indiana Senate. In next week's Report, I will review some of the bills that will occupy our attention in the next several weeks.

If you need to reach me during the 2006 session, you can call using the toll-free Statehouse telephone number of 1-800-382-9842, e-mail me through my Internet web site at www.IN.gov/H46 or write to me in care of the Indiana House of Representatives, 200 W. Washington St., Indianapolis, IN 46204.

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